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ABSTRACT

Tribal cultures in South India are extremely varied. This paper examines different indicators of modernization, such as the degree of urbanization and the spread of literacy among the tribes, focusing on how modernization affects the tribal mind set and how this awareness is reflected in various processes of acculturation (e.g., claiming one's mother tongue identity through the ancestral language or switching over to the dominant language in the region). The paper also examines attitudes of indigenous people toward acquiring contact languages for intra-tribal, inter-tribal, and tribal-nontribal communications. It highlights certain issues relevant to nation-building, such as relations between the individual, community, culture, and state, correlating them to the newly crystallized consciousness among indigenous peoples enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The paper notes that most studies on tribal languages focus on the taxonomies of language classification, language borrowing, and relations between languages based on majority and minority status, and most developmental programs for indigenous peoples are influenced by a perspective inherited from colonial anthropology. It stresses that all human conglomerations (primitive as well as contemporary) have a unique, space-and-time-bound ethos, and indigenous heritages must be respected on their own terms, rather than absorbed into the mainstream. (Contains 23 references.) (SM)

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# SELF–ARTICULATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE THROUGH LANGUAGE:

## Exploring Tribal Linguistic Heritage in South India

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## ABSTRACT

All human conglomerations, 'primeval' as well as 'contemporary', acquire a unique, space- and time-bound ethos. A distinct self conceptualisation of 'indigenous peoples' in the context of natural, social and historical processes is referred as 'tribal consciousness' – mutual knowledge in distinguishing groups, *self* form the *other*.

Profiles of tribal cultures provide us many insights into probing the questions such identity of numerically small groups in a positive and sublime manner to enrich the nation's 'composite' heritage.

Tribals in South India show a great deal of *variation*. The southern tract across the river Krishna stretches from the Western Ghats in southern Kanara, Coorg Hills to Kanyakumari. Over one hundred tribes comprising 5.8 million population (in 1981) cover four states – Andhra Pradesh, Karanataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala --- and a Union

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territory, Lakshadweep in the Arabian sea. Most of these groups belong to the Dravidian family, a few are traced to the Indo-Aryan and Austric origin. Many groups of the South-central region spill over southern Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, and eastern Maharashtra.

The study presents a diagnosis of various indicators of modernisation such as, the degree of urbanisation and the spread of literacy among the Scheduled tribes. The projection of these issues is aimed at acquiring a 'grassroots' understanding of tribal socities through their claims of identity and communication in the changed circumstances.

The study leads to probe into the questions such as how these modernising pursuits affect the tribal 'mind set'? How is this awareness reflected through various processes of acculturation, eg. claiming one's mother tongue identity through the 'ancestral' language or switching over to the language dominant in the region? What are the attitudes of tribals towards acquiring *contact* languages for intra-tribal, inter-tribal, as well as for tribal-nontribal, communications?

The study further highlights certain basic issues relevant in nation-building, i.e., relations between individual, community, cultural and State, correlating them to the newly 'crystallised' consciousness among the tribals enrishrined in the Indian Constitution.

For : National Seminar on Tribal Heritage : ANADI –2
Mangalore, December. 2000

# SELF–ARTICULATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE THROUGH LANGUAGE:

## Exploring Tribal Heritage in South India

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ALL HUMAN CONGLOMERATIONS, 'primeval' as well as 'contemporary', acquire a unique, space- and time-bound ethos. A distinct self conceptualisation of 'indigenous peoples' in the context of natural, social and historical processes is referred as 'tribal consciousness' – mutual knowledge in distinguishing groups, *self* from the *other*.

The term 'tribal community' in common parlance has been associated with people living in isolated surroundings from the rest of the population adhering to a routine of seasonal movements[1]. With the advent of colonisation two centuries ago, European anthropologists, with their quest for the exotic, used the term in a pejorative sense to denote "a race of people in a primitive or barbarous condition" - the *aborigines*. Indian terms *adivasi, vanajati, janajati, janajamati* also carry a similar connotation.

In independent India, the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution lay down special provisions for Scheduled or Tribal areas and recongnise the importance of the traditional Tribal Councils so as to have considerable control of their own affairs and protection of their land

[1] In medieval English the word 'tribe' was used in a neutral sense: "a primary aggregate of people claiming descent from a common ancestor"



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and customs. The Article 342 confers special powers on the President "to specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribal communities" which shall be "deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that state". By the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950, 212 tribes in 14 provinces were declared to be Scheduled Tribes.

The 1951 Census enumerates 19.1 million. i.e., 5.6 per cent of the total population of the country, as Scheduled tribes. In 1981 Census, 53.8 million are enumerated as belonging to the Scheduled tribes, that is, 7.9 per cent of the total population. The tribal awareness has significantly grown over the five decades in independent India. The post.-Independence safeguards enshrined in the Constitution has served as a strong impetus for asserting the 'tribal' identity. These safeguards have anticipated, in many respects, the Convention of the Indigenous People drawn up by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1957.

Anthropologically, it makes an interesting account to note the varying criteria explicated by provincial governments to identify the tribal population (Shrikant 1952):

***South India:***

*Hyderabad*: residence in jungles, animistic religion, the use of local dialect, forcible marriage, hunting, fishing and gathering of forest food as the main means of subsistence, etc

*Madras*: primitive tribal way of life and residence in less easily accessible hills and in remote or interior forests, with little or no contact with other population groups

*Mysore*: habitation in remote hilly tracts in the jungle

*Travancore*: habitation in the jungle, tribal religion and certain racial or cultural characteristics.

***Central India:***

*Madhya Bharat*: tribal origin, speaking a tribal language and resident in forest areas

*Bhopal*: habitation in remote jungle and hill districts, nomadism hunting and gathering of forest fruits as the main means of subsistence

*Vindhya Pradesh*: dark skin, flat noses, preference for fruits, root and animal flesh, rather than foodgrains; the use for bark and leaves of trees as clothes on ceremonial occasions, nomadism, witch-doctoring and the worship of ghosts and spirits

*Bombay*: residence in forest areas

***East India:***

*Assam*: (a) descent from Mongoloid stock, (b) the members of the Tibeto--Burman linguistic groups, and (c) the existence of a unit of social organisation of the village clan type

*West Bengal*: residence in jungle and tribal origin

*Orissa*: pre-Dravidian or Monogoloid racial origin

These reports characteristically present an 'outsider' view of the tribal society, singling out the aboringinals from the mainstream on the basis of their physical characteristics, linguistic affiliation, culture contact, occupation, and territorial distribution (for a perceptive summary of these features, cf. Mamoria 1957, pp. 35-46)

**Primeval Groups and Human Civilisation**

Such groups, isolated in different pockets all over the world, now being named as the 'indegenous peoples', carry a strong sense of distinct identity, by attributing an 'ingroup' label to their members and the mother tongue spoken by them. Many tribal labels literally mean 'us, men, people'. In the North-East region the generic label *naga* can be traced to the term *nok* 'people'; Garos of Meghalaya are *mande* 'man'; Kachari tribes in the Assam valley call themselves *boro* 'man'.

In the Jharkhand region, a tribe called Ho means 'people'; Santals are known as *hor* 'people'; in Munda language *horo* signifies 'people', they are often referred as *horoko*. The tribe Korku means 'men'; *kor* 'man', *-ku* 'plural suffix'. The tribe Birhor comprises *bir* 'jungle' and *hor* 'people', 'the jungle people'.

This distinct self-conceptualisation of tribals in the context of natural, social and historical processes focuses 'tribal corporate personality' (Minz 1987). It pervades over the tribal ethos in relation to its own tradition and history, and in relation to outsiders; such as in the Chotanagpur region the term, *diku : di* 'that' + - *ku* plural 'these', carries the connotation of 'outsider', often stereotyped as an 'exploiting outsider' (Sinha et al 1969). A tribe is regarded as self-sufficient, unstratified and culturally homogeneous. These communities "until recently maintained practically autogenous sources of legitimation of cultural and social processes" (Roy Burman 1989).

In a universal perspective when taking into account the dynamics of persistence and change in tribal identities in general, and in their language behaviour in particular, throughout the world, one notices a significant shift from the earlier view of tribe as "a simplistic social formation in the evolutionary scheme" (to be replaced by social formations of higher order) to the new approach of treating tribe as "a distinct type of social formation with elements of perpetuity in diverse technological contexts" (emerging from a worldview of cognitive continuum from self to cosmos). Some of the significant characteristics of different social formation are elaborated below, discussing the *civilisation continuum;* these features broadly distinguish 'primeval' groups (the indigenous peoples, tribal societies in the Indian context) from 'modernised' groups (cf. Table 1).

TABLE 1

**Human Civilisation Continuum**

| Parameters | Primeval groups | | 'Modernised' groups | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Processes | Manifestations | Processes | Manifestations |
| *Worldview* | | | | |
| Nature | harmony with nature: "Life and earth are synonymous" | myths and superstitions, animism, spiritualism | control of nature: "Earth as a commodity, an economic value" | 'institutional' religions, rational pursuits |
| Nurture | abiding faith in nature (destiny), morals as a regulatory device | technology as an 'instrument' | closer to nurture, superiority of human intervention | technology as *raison detre* of 'progress' |
| *Resources:* | | | | |
| Possessions | collective custody, transitory 'inter-generational' rights | societal trusteeship | individual ownership, permanent control | capitalism, capital-intensive technology |
| Consumption | consumption regulated by needs | barter economy, rhythm of replacing resources, *jhum* cultivation | consumption as a token of gratification, of status | fiscal and market forces, consumer society leading to depletion of resources |
| Organisation | based on socio- centric roles | concept of *dharma* | based on ego-centred rights | concepts of equality, freedom |
| | stratification within smaller units, self- contained | tribal clans, chief-doms, *panchayats*, joint families, communitarian languages in smaller regions | expanding units | feudal rule, colonialism, multinational corporations, standard languages of wider domain, globalisation |
| Values | egalitarian ethos based on sharing | solidarity, societal cooperation | ambition-centred norms based on dominance "survival of the fittest" | universal human rights, corporate corporate privileges on communitarian lines |
| | ascription-oriented transformations characterising age/gender | organic heterogeneity | achievement-oriented mobility charactering accumulations | structural efforts to homogeneity |



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One has to keep in mind that under different ecological conditions, through varied historical processes and human creativity, every individual culture, primeval or modernised, can be portrayed with a unique profile, in a spiral frame, instead of a chronological linear order. Our humanity lies just as much in recognising the marvel and wonder and truth of its variety as in acknowledging its unity (Miri 1988).

The colonial practice of viewing tribal societies through various ethno-centric parameters and mainstream perspectives has resulted into many stereotypes, as spelt out by provincial governments, discussed above. In this context, it is essential to understand the 'tribal psyche' in more objective terms, identifying the primeval characteristics of such societies in relation to nature, resources, the collectivity (of people around), and the ultimate values in life representing the universality of their traditional ways of thinking. Essential characteristics of such 'primeval' groups at one end of the *civlisation continuum* radically contrast with the 'modernised' groups from the other extreme who claim to be 'developed' societies on the scale of *progress.*

There has been an ongoing debate among social scientists regarding the merits of being an 'insider' or an 'outsider' in studying various aspects of human behaviour; 'insiders' romanticise the assets of "only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches", and 'outsiders' emphasise the predicament that "one can hardly get out of one's own skin". In this context, one cannot totally rule out a degree of subjectivity in characterising a variety of social groups on this continuum. This predicament leads us to view the entire spectrum in more *synergic* terms. (cf Table 1).

Regional or geographical classification of the tribes in India has been made by Guha (1955), Majumdar and Madan (1956), Dube (1960), Atal (1965), Roy Burma and Harit (1971), Vidyarthi and Rai (1979), and Khubchandani (1992). Profiles of tribal cultures provide us many insights into probing the questions such as how to channelise the concerns of ethnic identity of

numerically small groups in a positive and sublime manner to enrich the nation's 'composite' heritage, instead of treating them as underprivileged 'powerless' minorities and allowing the small cultures to submit to the pressures of assimilation within the dominant culture, under the compulsions of joining the 'mainstream'.

**Southern Tribes : A Profile**

In the midst of cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the Indian subcontinent, many tribal communities are gradually opening up for intense interaction with the non-tribal world. Their lifestyles and communication patterns are going through a rapid change as hitherto 'segregated' tribal populations participate in modern institutions, such as education, industries, urbanisation, elections, and so on.

Though guided by the statutory recognition in favour of mother tongue education to linguistic minorities (Article 350 A, *Constitution of India* ), languages associated with tribals are, by and large, charged with minimum functional load: their education is generally conducted through the languages of dominant cultures or by introducing bilingual education with a blend of 'ancestral' language as a *preparatory* medium followed by a gradual switching over to either the languages of respective regions or to Hindi/English depending on their response to various modernisation processes.

Tribals in South India show a great deal of *variation*. The southern tract across the river Krishna stretches from the Western Ghats in southern Kanara, Coorg Hills to Kanyakumari. Over one hundred tribes comprising 5.8 million population (in 1981) cover four states – Andhra Pradesh, Karanataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala --- and a Union territory, Lakshadweep in the Arabian sea. Most of these groups belong to the Dravidian family, a few are traced to the Indo-Aryan and

Austric origin. Many groups of the South-central region spill over southern Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, and eastern Maharashtra.

The study presents a diagnosis of various indicators of modernisation such as, the degree of urbanisation and the spread of literacy among the Scheduled tribes. The projection of these issues is aimed at acquiring a 'grassroots' understanding of tribal societies in the southern region through their claims of identity and communication in the changed circumstances. The study leads to probe into the questions such as how these modernising pursuits affect the tribal 'mind set'? How is this awareness reflected through various processes of acculturation, eg. claiming one's mother tongue identity through the 'ancestral' language or switching over to the language dominant in the region? What are the attitudes of tribals in South India towards acquiring *contact* languages for intra-tribal, inter-tribal, as well as for tribal-nontribal, communications? The study further highlights certain basic issues relevant in nation-building, i.e., relations between individual, community, culture and State, correlating them to the newly 'crystallised' consciousness among the tribals enrishrined in the Indian Constitution. A critical churning of these issues, a sort of *manthan*, can significantly help in evolving a tribal-friendly policy for the country.

**Strength of Population**

When comparing to North-east and Central regions, tribal communities in the South are in small numbers, and they show the signs of assimilation in the dominant culture of the region. The dispersal of these groups in southern states, along with the proportions concentrated in urban areas and the literacy rates, as per the 1981 Census, is given in Table 2:

**TABLE 2: Tribal Population in the South : 1981**

| States | Tribal population (thousands) | Percentage to state population | Distribution in urban areas (per cent) | Literacy rate (per cent) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **INDIA** | **53,818** | **7.9** | **6.20** | **16.35** |
| Andhra Pradesh | 3,176 | 5.9 | 6.22 | 7.82 |
| Karnataka | 1,825 | 4.9 | 12.87 | 20.14 |
| Tamilnadu | 520 | 1.1 | 9.69 | 20.46 |
| Kerala | 261 | 1.0 | 1.91 | 31.79 |
| Lakshadweep | 38 | 93.8 | 44.68 | 53.13 |

Lakshadweep, comprising nearly 94 per cent population catogrised as 'tribal, is a homogeneous territory (like Mizoram in the North-east). In Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka tribals form a significant component : nearly 6 and 5 per cent respectively; In remaining two states, Tamilnadu and Kerala, tribals are only one per cent each.

The tribal population is largely confined to rural areas. The 1981 all-India average of urban population among tribal groups is only 6.2 per cent (urban index of the total population is 23.7 per cent).

**Growth of literacy**

In 'development' pursuits of a nation, literacy is recognised as a powerful instrument of social change. An individual is considered as literate 'if he can both read and write with an understanding in any language' (1971 Census). The spread of literacy provides an important indicator of the 'modernisation' processes taking place among the tribal population in different states. The literacy ratio among tribals all over the country is lower than the total literacy ratio in individual states and (UTs). The 1981 Census records only 16.4 per cent of tribals as literates, whereas the all-India average of literacy among the total population is recorded 36.2 per cent.

In this regard, the tribals have come a long way from the situation in 1931, when the census recorded a negligible 0.1 per cent literacy rate among tribals (all-India general literacy rate then was 4.9 per cent). During 1961-81 tribal literacy registered a phenomenal growth throughout the country. The breakdown of literacy growth among tribals in southern states is give in Table 3:

**TABLE 3: Literacy Growth Among Tribals : 1961-1981**
**(Percentages)**

| States | Literacy rate (Total population) | Tribal literacy | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1981 | 1981 | 1971 | 1961 |
| **INDIA** | **36.2** | **16.35** | **11.3** | **8.5** |
| Lakshadweep | 55.07 | 53.13 | 41.4 | 22.3 |
| Kerala | 70.42 | 31.79 | 25.7 | 17.3 |
| Tamilnadu | 46.76 | 20.46 | 9.0 | 5.9 |
| Karnataka | 38.46 | 20.14 | 14.9 | 8.2 |
| Andhra Pradesh | 22.94 | 7.82 | 5.3 | 4.4 |

* Source : Raza et al, NIEPA, New Delhi, 1985

One notices a slower growth of literacy among tribals in Andhra Pradesh. Lakshadweep shows the trend of *parallel* literacy, registering a narrow gap (merely 1.94 per cent), between the literary rate of the state's total population and of the tribal population. Other three states are marked by a wide gap between the literacy rates of the total and the tribal population: Kerala (38.63 per cent), Tamilnadu (26.30), and Andhra Pradesh (15.12). Most of the districts with a high rate of literacy lie in the areas in which tribal population constitutes only a small proportion of total population.

Though there are many variable factors affecting the pace of urbanisation and of literacy among tribals in different states, one notices a remarkable correlation between the ratios of

urbanisation and of literate population among tribal societies. States where tribal population is 'significantly urban' show the signs of parallel literacy.

The number of illiterate females particularly among Scheduled tribes continues to increase at a higher rate than the number of illiterate males in general. According to 1981 Census, the literacy rate of the female population among Scheduled tribes is 8.04 per cent, against the general female literacy rate 24.82 per cent. The adult education enrolment among the Scheduled tribes is reported 14.3 per cent, against the general enrolment of 59.9 per cent for the entire country. In colleges, Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes children are admitted under relaxed eligibility criteria; even then, only 2.1 per cent among Scheduled tribes children go in for university education; the female ratio among them is mere 1.8 per cent.

As per the 1961 Census data, 61 rural tribals and 124 urban tribals per 1000 were covered upto the elementary stage of education; 20 rural and 85 urban tribals completed the primary education, and only 6 rural and 13 urban tribals qualified upto the Matric stage.

Although the literacy rates of Scheduled tribes during the post-Independence period have increased, the gap between the general and tribal literacy rates is staggering. Residential remoteness of tribals and their distinct life style are attributed as factors for such a big gap in respect of attitudes and aspirations of tribals and non-tribals. It is pertinent to project the question of literacy inequality within the different components of tribal population in its historical perspective (Raza, Aijazuddin Ahmed and Nuna 1985).

**Population Growth**

The decade 1971-81 is marked by a sudden spurt in the growth of tribal population showing an increase of 41.8 per cent against the all-India growth of total population 24.7 per cent. The earlier decade 1961-71 recorded an increase of 21.85 per cent in the tribal population

against the country's total population growth of 24.80 per cent (indicating a slower growth rate by nearly three per cent). Consequently, the tribal component in the country's total population has increased from 6.8 per cent in 1971 to 7.9 per cent in 1981. Details of population growth during 1961-81 in southern states and variation in its tribal component are given in Table 4:

**TABLE 4:**
**Tribal Population Growth and Percentage to State Population : 1961-1981**

| States | Tribal percentage to state population | | | Population growth rate (per cent) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1981 | 1971 | 1961 | 1971-81 | | 1961-71 | |
| | | | | Overall | Tribal | Overall | Tribal |
| **INDIA** | **7.9** | **6.8** | **5.6(1951)** | **25.00** | **41.80** | **24.80** | **21.85** |
| Lakshadweep | 93.82 | 92.9 | 97.9 | 26.53 | 27.83 | 31.95 | -- |
| Andhra Pradesh | 5.93 | 3.8 | 3.7 | 23.10 | 91.59 | 20.90 | 25.16 |
| Karnataka | 4.91 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 26.75 | 689.21 | 24.22 | 20.39 |
| Tamilnadu | 1.07 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 17.50 | 67.00 | 22.30 | 23.51 |
| Kerala | 1.03 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 19.24 | (-) 2.92 | 24.76 | 26.60 |

A sudden rise in the growth rates among tribals in different states is attributed to the removal of area restrictions in respect of the most of the Scheduled Tribes, notified through the Parliament Amendment Act in 1976. It has remarkably affected the composition of tribal population in Karnataka and Maharashtra; in Karnataka the tribal population goes up by 689 per cent , against the state's total population growth of only 27 per cent. On the other hand, the tribal share in a few of these states (and UTs) has dwindled mainly due to the increased tempo of non-tribal migrations with the changed socio-economic scenario, and also due to assimilatory trends among tribals to identify with the dominant culture surrounding them. Modifications in the lists of Scheduled tribes made from time to time have also affected the position in certain states such as, Kerala shows an actual decline in the decade 1971-81, reducing its share in the state from 1.3 per cent to 1.03 per cent.

**Tribal Languages**

The 1961 Census makes a complete listing of 128 tribal languages (along with mother tongue variants), mostly based on the Grierson classification given in the *Linguistic Survey of India* (1905-1930): 20 Austric languages, 91 Tibeto-Burman, 15 Dravidian, and two Indo-Aryan languages. Merely three per cent of the total Dravidian speakers are classified as tribal (Mitra 1966).

Tribal languages of the Dravidian family comprise of three groups: two languages spoken by small populations in Tamilnadu, Toda and Kota, belong to the South Dravidian group; eight languages with over 3 million speakers belong to the Central Dravidian group -- Gondi, Kui, Koya, Khond, Parji, Kolami, Jatapu, Konda; and three languages with 1.5 million population are assigned to the North Dravidian group -- Kurukh, Kisan, and Malto.

The 1961 Census recorded two Dravidian hybrids--Bharia nad Ladhadi; these are retained by a small number of speakers, spread in the central belt of the country, from West Bengal to Andhra Pradesh and to Maharashtra. (There is another North Dravidian language, Brahui, located on the Sind-Baluchistan border in Pakistan).

There are four tribal languages claimed by over one million speakers each in the 1981 Census; two of them belong to the Dravidian family, prevalent in Central India:
Bhili, I8ndo-Aryan, 4.45 million; Santali, Austric, 4.21 million; Gondi, Dravidian,1.96 million; Kurukh, Dravidian,1.26 million. Other Prominent Dravidian languages are: Kui 508 thousand, Koya 242 thousand, Khond 204 thousand, Kisan 155 thousand.

In recent decades various modernisation processes have further accelerated the pace of assimilation. The ratio of non-tribal mother tongue claims has increased from 51 per cent

(in 1971) to 58 per cent (in 1981). About 12 per cent tribals retain certain hybrid varieties, with the Indo-Aryan base (Lamani, Banjari, Sadri, Khortha, Dangi, Bhatri) or the Dravidian base (Vadari, Yerukula), as their mother tongue.

The 1961 Census records over 30 such distinct 'tribal' vernaculars. The 1971 Census enumerates 20 of them spoken by more than ten thousand speakers each; total claims amounting to nearly 4.7 million, i.e. 12 per cent of the total tribal population. A bulk of them belong to Indo-Aryan languages (95 per cent), and rest (5 per cent) to Dravidian languages. Prominent 'tribal' vernaculars and their dominant regions, along with the major language with which they are clubbed together, are listed in Table 5:

**TABLE 5:**
**'Tribal' Vernaculars of Major Non-tribal Languages: and 1971**

| 'Tribal' vernaculars | Mother tongue speakers 1971 (thousands) | Regions (percentage of the speakers) |
|---|---|---|
| **Rajasthani (Hindi)** | | |
| Lamani | 1,203 | A.P. (82), Maharashtra (17) |
| Banjari | 472 | Karnataka (49), Maharashtra (41), M.P. (8) |
| **Kannada** | | |
| Badaga | 105 | Tamilnadu |
| Kuruba/Kurumba | 8 | Karnataka (62), Tamilnadu |
| Soliga | 2 | Tamilnadu (30) A.P. (2), |
| Naiki | 1.2 | Karnataka |
| **Telugu** | | |
| Vadari | 36 | Maharashtra (80), Karnataka (15), A.P. (5) |
| Chenchu | neg | Andhra Pradesh |
| Yenadi | neg | Andhra Pradesh |
| **Tamil** | | |
| Yerukula | 68 | Andhra Pradesh |
| Irula/Iruliga | 5 | Tamilnadu |
| **Malayalam** | | |
| Yerava | 11 | Karnataka |
| Pania | 5 | Kerala, Tamilnadu |

The 1961 Census provides a breakdown of the tribal population identified with dominant regional language (about forty per cent) in the country, in addition to those claiming tribal vernaculars:

**TABLE 6:**
**Regional Language Claims of Southern Tribes: 1961**

| Languages | States | Tribal claims: 1961 (thousands) | Percentage total speakers of the language |
|---|---|---|---|
| Telugu | Andhra Pradesh | 913 | 2.4 |
| Tamil | Tamilnadu | 268 | 0.9 |
| Malayalam | Kerala | 196 | 1.2 |
| Kannada | Karnataka | 118 | 0.7 |
| Tulu | Karnataka | 29 | 3.1 |
| Kodagu (Coorgi) | Karnataka | 0.7 | 0.9 |

Many tribal groups, though living in a contiguous territory, come under the jurisdiction of more than one states. Prominent inter-state tribal speech communities in the South, with their percentages in different states according to 1981 Census, are enumerated in Table 7 :

**TABLE 7:**
**Inter-State Tribal Languages in the South: 1981**

| Languages | Speakers (thousand) | Percentages of speakers in states |
|---|---|---|
| Gondi | 1,955 | MP 69, Maharashtra 23, Andhra 6, Orissa 6 |
| Savara | 235 | Orissa 79, Andhra 20, Tripura 0.4 |
| Koya | 243 | Andhra 65, Orissa 35 |
| Kolami | 79 | Maharashtra 83, Andhra 17 |

**Vitality of Ancestral Languages**

Mother tongue claims of a few 'tribal' vernaculars of non-tribal languages exceed the strength of the corresponding tribes: Lamani claims are nine-fold higher than the Sugali and Andh tribes in

Andhra Pradesh. A few tribes claim the retention rate of their ancestral variety less than one per cent: such as, Yenadi and Chenchu (both Telugu).

A cursory glance comparing tribal languages on the vitality scale during 1961-71 reveals the attitudes favouring a gradual language shift. Many tribal languages do not keep the pace vis-à-vis the growth of the tribal community bearing the same name.

**TABLE 8:**
**Language Retention Ratio among Tribals : 1971-1981**

| States | Tribal Percentage to state population 1981 | Tribal population (thousand) 1981 | Tribal languages speakers (thousand) 1981 | Language retention ratio 1981 | Tribal population (thousand) 1971 | Tribal languages speakers (thousands) 1971 | Language retention ratio 1971 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **INDIA** | **7.9** | **53,818** | **22,340** | **42** | **39,015** | **18,420** | **49** |
| **South** | | | | | | | |
| Lakshadweep(UT) | 93.8 | 38 | NIL | -- | 30 | NIL | -- |
| Andhra Pradesh | 5.9 | 3,176 | 391 | 12 | 658 | 377 | 23 |
| Karnataka | 4.9 | 1,825 | 0.8 | 0.04 | 231 | 0.5 | 0.2 |
| Tamilnadu | 1.1 | 520 | 2.0 | 0.4 | 312 | NA | -- |
| Kerala | 2.0 | 261 | NA | -- | 269 | NA | -- |

A language diagnosis of socio-cultural scene of tribals in the country presented in this study highlights the characteristics of resilience and open-endedness among various groups in their social boundary definition and boundary maintenance. The study provides a macro-view of the way different tribal groups in different regions have responded to the thrust of 'development' during the post-Independence era.

The situation, however, is marked by glaring anomaly between the cultural milieu of the tribal institutions and their time-honoured communication patterns (such as, fuzzy boundaries in verbal repertoire, grassroots multilingualism), and the 'modernising networks (introducing writing systems, literacy, explicit standards and norms), in which the tribals have to operate at inter-personal, social, economic and political levels.

A sense of peoplehood seems to be emerging among the tribals in the midst of distinct socio-cultural identities, along with ethnic and regional dimensions. A communitarian self-understanding, transcending the segmental sociolinguistic identities, is being linked with tribal consciousness in several compact regions (such as, Jharkhand, Gondwana, Bhilbhoomi in the Central belt, and Nagaland, Aruncachal and Bodoland, in the North-east). The Jharkhand movement represents a characteristic articulation of *syncretic* identity, welding together the aspirations of tribal groups belonging to different ancestries (Austric, Dravidian and Indo-Aryan) referred as 'grassroots Aryanisation".

Tribal society is not so stagnant as has been perceived by many social scientists. The present study has drawn attention to the socio-cultural indicators signifying the directions of continuity and change in the tribal society. In the contemporary climate of development, the configurations of traditional and modernising milieus are bound to affect one another. How is this dynamics influencing the socio-cultural profile of tribal communities?

There are positive and negative elements as components of the tribal consciousness. Every group comes to terms with the multi-faceted reality in its own unique manner. There is no fixed recipe for the 'correct' blend. Many individuals and groups learn to live with contradictions through processes such as, syncretism (a happy mix, it may not be so rational), compartmentalisation, assimilation, and so on.

When the norms and values of one culture dominate the other (through subjugation, colonisation, or in the name of development) these can generate dissonance between the two or result in the assimilation of one culture, weaker in demographic or economic terms, with the

other. Feelings of resentment against outsiders and virtual rejection of the outsiders among a section of tribals indicate their uncertainty, a sense of helplessness, about their future[2].

It is a sad reality that in the contemporary milieu, the relationship between small and big cultural entities is not organised on *reciprocity*. The 'big' cultures all round the world, supported by enormous political and economic advantages, by and large, tend to carry inherent tendencies which go radically against the basic intentions of a fair communication. The tendency to obtain supremacy over weaker groups, to be hegemonistic, is subtly present even in the majority's care of patronising 'small' cultures. Such a climate carries the seeds of small cultural entities being driven on the defensive to protect their identities through the demands of reciprocity and parity in a heterogeneous situation.

At the same time, a 'small' culture carries within the potential of contributing to the larger ethos. Every culture, irrespective of being big or small, serves as a bridge between others and as an instrument of interaction which is humanly universal. It will, therefore, be a mistake to regard tribal communities as small territorial groups which can be regulated by coercive power of the State.

Against all socio-economic odds, tribals persist with a parallel system, managing their lifestyles outside the mainstream, linked with the kinship principles of their historical identity. The recapitulation of the interaction networks among tribals and non-tribals sustained during past few centuries can help in understanding the present-day crisis among the tribals, the *Adivasi Vedana* 'the tribal pathos', in more transparent terms:

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[2] "A Bhil may brave a tiger in forest, but is afraid to face even an insignificant outsiders" (Doshi 1971).

1. The processes of imperceptible gradual *Sanskritisation* around the tribals tend to place them in a caste-ridden social structure which shows the signs of incompatibility with their traditional *egalitarian* ethos.
2. The processes of *missionisation* set in motion 'alternate' values of life against their indigenous beliefs and customs. The seeds of de-tribalisation were sown by introducing them to the rudiments of literate cultures through the translation of the Bible and of gospels in their own languages.
3. The processes of *indigenisation* gave birth to many reform movements during past two hundred years. The intermittent rebellions against the forces of subjugation and exploitation give us a glimpse of their determination to preserve the core of tribal personality along with their efforts to breakaway from the tradition-bound superstitious ways of life.
4. The most intense intervention in the tribal life has come through the processes of *modernisation*. The five decades of 'developmental' experience after the Independence can be described as a mixed blessing for the tribals. Through the diverse networks of development (mining, deforestation, the construction of high dams on tribal lands and so on), they have become the first targets of the destructive forces of modernisation, and have been made economically destitute and marginalised.

In the socio-cultural realm as well, the values of 'secondary' modernastion throughout the developing world put a higher premium on an uncritical *replacement* of the traditional ethos, with an emphasis on trailing behind the path already taken by 'advanced' societies (Khubchandani 1991). The so-called primitive societies are supposed to reach "the same level of well-being by simply copying and adapting here and there the forms, criteria, the mechanisms through which the rich world had reached its affluence" (Somavia 1983).

The literate world seems to be circumscribed by the myth of treating language in everyday life as a 'crystallised entity' characterised by distinct tradition, embodied in its literary heritage. This myth is being shared by many 'underdeveloped' speech communities too in their drive for modernisation, just as they accept many other institutions and values from the 'developed' societies for transforming the economic and technological patterns of their societies. (cf. The 'Centre-Periphery' model of development, discussed in detail in Khubchandani 1983).

This tribal experience, the *tribal pathos*, prompts us to re-examine the relationship between the State and community. It is time to seriously assess the relevance of tribal heritage to the human civilisation as a whole. In what way can the tribal ethos contribute to resolving the challenges faced by the 'modern man'? In this regard, some of the characteristic features of tribal society which need to be taken seriously are:

a) The tribal culture, at its best, provides a living example of Gandhian concept of trusteeship. The socio-economic structures among tribals have till today remained *need*-based rather than *greed*-based. This tribal dictum of the communitarian use of natural resources can provide a firm foundation to the contemporary movements of protecting the environment (cf. Table 1).

b) In cross-cultural settings, one observes that individual and group relations among tribals are valued on trust, rather than on dominance; the modern concept of 'majority versus minority' appears so alien to the tribal ethos. Tribal interaction patterns derived from the traditional milieu are, by and large, characterised by the celebration of diversity (Khubchandani 1996). On the sociolinguistic plane, the tribal spirit of human trust, the consensus, is revealed in the composite characteristics of their identity and communication.

In this regard, Gandhiji rightly explains the inter-dependence of individual units in a society through an analogy of "concentric circles in an ocean"; these circles keep on widening to the outer periphery, but never ascending like "a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom", In such a pluralistic pattern, the 'inner circle' forms an integral unit of the 'outer oceanic circle', and will not be crushed by the overwhelming power of the outer periphery. On the other, each should give strength to the other (Kripalani 1958).

So far, most of the studies on tribal languages have concentrated on the taxonomies of language classification, meticulous analyses of borrowings and interference, identifying relations between languages based on 'majority' and 'minority' populations, and similar aspects which touch only a surface of the tribal reality. Most of the developmental programmes for tribals are influenced by the perspective we inherited from the 'colonial' anthropology. With such a worldview, the tribals are often looked upon as 'museum specimens' to be cherished for their exoticness and to be clinically observed and analysed before their extinction -- a sort of *pre-mortem* (instead of the post-mortem).

Under such compulsions we ignore the sociological fact that all human conglomerations, so-called 'primitive' as well as 'contemporary', acquire a unique, space-and time-bound ethos, The tribals heritage need to be respected on its own terms . It will be disastrous to aim at absorbing them into the 'mainstream'. It is the synthesis emerging from the interaction of peoples which can bring the fruits of development of tribal society without causing physical, social or psychological damage.

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